Employer-Based Placements: A Double-Edged Sword

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As a part-time social work student with a full-time job, the prospect of completing an employer-based generalist field placement was both necessary and appealing. My employer was supportive, and my field instructor's proposed activities aligned perfectly with my professional interests. While I am grateful for the learning opportunity provided by my employer-based placement, the process and execution presented unexpected challenges. Through my personal experiences as an MSW student navigating the employer-based placement process, I hope to offer general considerations about employer-based placements to help assist other social work students, employers, and field departments in determining whether this route is practical, given that field education is an essential element of the social work curriculum nationwide (Skeen, 2023; Wayne et al., 2010).

The Appeal of Employer-Based Placements

Social work education programs increasingly incorporate employer-based placements into their curriculum due to their financial, practical, and professional benefits (Lynch et al., 2023). The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) defined the requirements for employer-based placements in 2015 (CSWE, 2015). These guidelines were further updated and extended during the COVID pandemic (CSWE, 2022) to allow for more overlap between work and field activities. However, while employer-based placements were broadly supported by the CSWE, the practical challenges of integrating education and work are far more nuanced and individualized than regulatory frameworks can address effectively. Students pursuing this alternative path must actively advocate for themselves within a system that continues to prioritize conventional placements.

When selecting my MSW program, I prioritized options that would accommodate my need to maintain full-time employment while supporting my family, requiring flexibility in degree completion and meeting program requirements. I therefore enrolled in a three-year MSW program. This part-time to full-time program allows for a gradual increase in academic requirements. According to the "2023 CSWE Annual Survey of Social Work Programs" (CSWE, 2023), over one-third of MSW students were enrolled in a part-time program during the survey period. Part-time programs offer valuable pathways for working professionals pursuing advanced education. However, I discovered that many programs transition from part-time to full-time after the second year, creating a significant challenge for students who must maintain employment throughout their education. This structural limitation often forces students to make difficult choices between financial stability and educational progression, particularly during their specialization year.

Beyond practical and financial considerations, pursuing an employer-based placement enables students to build upon existing professional relationships and institutional knowledge. This generally results in a shorter orientation period and learning curve (Lynch et al., 2023). My professional experience only partially aligned with the responsibilities of the practicum, as there was limited overlap between them. Although my main work focused on coordinating studies and ensuring regulatory compliance, it also involved patient-centered activities, including assessments. For my placement activities, I expanded these assessment skills and conducted biopsychosocial assessments for our interdisciplinary clinic patients. Therefore, my placement activities directly built upon my previous work experience, enabling me to apply established skills in a new professional setting. Additionally, thanks to my role as a student and the excellent supervision from my field instructor, I had the opportunity immediately to implement new skills and approaches learned in the classroom, such as facilitating support groups and asking open-ended questions. This, in turn, improved my work performance and broadened my practical skills.

Lastly, some students use employer-based placements as pathways to higher qualifications and career advancement. This was not the case for me, as my role as a clinical trials coordinator was separate from my social work studies, and professional advancement within the clinical trials unit usually came from seniority and experience rather than a master's-level education. However, several of my classmates enrolled in the program to "add three letters behind their name," which would allow them to climb the professional ladder and increase their authority and compensation. For them, completing an employer-based placement is especially valuable, as it would enable them to acquire the practical knowledge necessary to perform higher-level activities. These financial, practical, and professional benefits must be carefully weighed against the potential challenges inherent to employer-based placements.

The Practical Reality of Employer-Based Placements

Students who embark on employer-based placements may eventually confront the reality that navigating multiple roles within one position can be challenging. For me, this realization came almost immediately. As a clinical trial coordinator, I routinely administered assessments to study participants. After beginning my employer-based placement, these assessments unexpectedly transformed into ad hoc mental health support sessions. While I continued asking standard questions, participants increasingly opened up about their struggles. I found myself torn between two distinct roles: being a researcher collecting objective data, and functioning as a social work intern offering support and providing resources.

I discussed this role duality and responsibility conflict with my supervisor, and we agreed on maintaining transparency while establishing boundaries appropriate to my status and specific tasks. Generally, role confusion and boundary issues manifest in numerous ways during employer-based placements. For example, students may find themselves navigating complex relationships, particularly if supervised by someone with less organizational seniority but more field experience.

Another risk of employer-based placements is the potential compromising of educational quality requirements essential to field education. Students who continue their regular employment as their placement may have limited exposure to new practices and experiences. Despite placement agreements explicitly defining learning objectives and activities, routine work tasks may overshadow these objectives, creating challenges in meeting educational requirements within existing job parameters. Given the limited overlap between my regular job and placement activities, this risk was minimized in my case.

This incongruence between my job responsibilities and placement tasks created meaningful challenges in time management and resource allocation. During the placement setup process, when discussing my work demands and proposed schedule, my employer expressed reservations about approving two full field placement days weekly. Their primary concern centered on my availability for research study visits, which were essential for meeting recruitment targets. Through collaborative discussion, we developed a flexible hybrid arrangement, in which I dedicated one full day exclusively to placement activities while distributing the remaining required field hours throughout the week. While this innovative solution enabled me to balance employment and academic requirements simultaneously, it occasionally generated tension between competing work and placement priorities, requiring ongoing communication and transparency.

The integration of student and employee roles within an existing workplace hierarchy

creates a unique dynamic. During my experience, I navigated a balance between fulfilling my responsibilities to my employer and pursuing my educational objectives. While my employer expressed support for the placement, I found opportunities to practice cross-systems communication as I articulated my learning needs during the field placement agreement process. For me, my field experience highlighted how employer-based placements can create situations requiring careful negotiation of dual roles, but it also provided valuable practice in professional advocacy, systems mediation, and personal growth through navigating these complex relationships.

Conclusion

Field education forms the cornerstone of our training as social workers (Wayne et al., 2010). For many students, employer-based placements represent a financial, practical, or professional necessity. While completing a field placement within one's employment environment offers valuable opportunities, students should be mindful of how the dual roles and overlapping relationships can create unique challenges and growth opportunities for professional development.

Field departments should support students' professional growth and educational aims by establishing agreements that clearly define roles, expectations, and specific learning activities separate from routine job responsibilities. Ongoing and transparent communication about goals, expectations, and concerns between employers and students is equally essential to fostering a mutually beneficial learning environment. I am truly grateful for my employer's unwavering support this past year, as well as for my field instructor, who went above and beyond to enhance the educational and career value of this placement. Their joint guidance helped me effectively navigate the complexities of dual systems while gaining valuable insights for both personal and professional development.

While employer-based placements can be successful with proper support and structure, my experience has highlighted broader systemic issues within field education. In the long term, it may be time to reconsider the field placement model and expand paid placement options for all MSW students (Farr, 2024). These students are typically highly qualified, receiving rigorous concurrent training through their institutions while often delivering essential services to their field placement agencies. They deserve compensation for their valuable contributions. Schools, accrediting bodies, and professional associations should collaborate to secure and provide funding for field placement agencies, enabling them to support their interns financially (Drechsler et al., 2023). As social workers, we have an ethical responsibility to create a more equitable landscape for field education, wherein students' placement decisions are guided by genuine choice rather than financial necessity.

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